

Statement of Cathy Senderling-McDonald, Executive Director of the County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA) regarding the need for service-rich placements for foster youth with complex needs

Sacramento County is not alone in facing difficulty finding safe, service-rich placements for youth with significant trauma and service needs that cross multiple systems. This is a significant issue both statewide and across the nation. Several factors have contributed to a reduction in the availability of residential treatment settings for these youth, including changes in state and federal laws and regulations; a sharp increase in demand due to a behavioral health crisis facing children and youth across the country as a result of the pandemic; and workforce challenges throughout our public, private and non-profit health and human services systems.

In a recent survey, county child welfare agencies reported more than 1,000 incidents of youth staying in an office, hotel or other unlicensed facility at some point during the 2022 calendar year. In that same year, agencies reported over 600 foster youth experienced stays in a juvenile hall. Similarly, while relatively few counties operate short-term shelters, those that do are increasingly being cited by state licensing officials for exceeding the maximum length of stay for youth who are in similar circumstances and have similar needs to those in the WET Center.

At the same time, the child welfare system has recognized that working earlier with communities to strengthen struggling families is critical to avoiding not just abuse or neglect but also reducing child welfare involvement and placement into foster care altogether. Earlier intervention, treatment and family support are the focus of much effort in California and nationwide. However, much remains to be done to put these services into place throughout the state. In the meantime, many current foster youth need additional support now, and suffer when that support is not readily available.

To help provide relief to struggling counties and the youth they serve, CWDA and the Chief Probation Officers of California (CPOC) partnered with Sacramento-area Senator Angelique Ashby this year to offer SB 408, which would have helped counties develop robustly staffed, service-rich enhanced facilities serving no more than four youth at a time. These “enhanced short-term residential treatment programs,” or STRTPs, would allow counties the time to ensure that services are in place for youth to move to an ongoing family-based placement. For youth still needing a higher level of care, the next placement might be in a regular STRTP that has a program fitting their service and support needs. Always, the goal is to step down to a family home, with ongoing support, as quickly as possible.

County child welfare agencies are not direct service providers and must leverage services on behalf of foster youth and families. This means it can take time to arrange services, such as from the local regional center, office of education, or county behavioral health department. Each of these agencies has its own process for eligibility and service delivery – often driven by federal and state requirements. Yet, these very services are typically needed immediately in order to stabilize and transition youth.

SB 408 is intended to provide immediate, direct services by trained professionals under one umbrella, working together. SB 408 will not only provide a safe location but also ensure services are immediately available. Importantly, this network of enhanced STRTPs would allow the state to test the concept of “no

ject/no reject,” meaning, unless extreme circumstances apply, the homes would be required to accept a youth in need and to work with the youth and county to maintain the placement even if difficulties occur during the youth’s stay.

Unfortunately, the enhanced STRTP component of SB 408 was stripped out of the bill by the Senate Appropriations Committee, and a related budget request from Sen. Ashby, CWDA and CPOC was not included in the Legislature’s recently unveiled two-house budget agreement.

Counties will continue to seek needed options to remedy the crisis that is before us for foster youth who are in need of services and supports, so we can move away from resorting to the types unlicensed settings in use now. This statewide and national crisis is one without an easy fix and will require state, national and local leaders working together to address it.